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ABSTRACT

A storyteller, folklorist, music advisor and language arts teacher uses storytelling in his classroom to inspire students to talk, write, perform, listen, and learn. Beginning with a seventh-grade elective class, the teacher (an employee of the Foxfire project and not trained as an English teacher) decided to spend two weeks with the students developing a radio program, two weeks on a collection project, and two weeks of storytelling. Students in the first several 6-week elective courses ended up liking storytelling so much that they never got around to the 2-week collection project. Students also formed small groups of storytellers to produce and perform their own stories or folktales for other groups of students. Some students who could not work well in a group became solo storytellers. Many of these students who had known little success previously, found success by performing for others. Comparison of pre and posttest indicated that students learned about plot, narration, dialogue, characterization, setting, and point of view by writing and performing stories and folktales. Similar approaches were used with students in a tenth-grade class--half of whom hated to read, while the other half loved to read. One very poor reader who was an able solo storyteller was convinced by the teacher to read a book because it had "stories" in it. (Brief annotations of three recommended sources for storytelling and folktales are attached.) (RS)

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ED 369 129

Teaching and storytelling: A Foxfire approach

by George Reynolds

Since 1976, when he received his M.A. in Folk and Intercultural Studies at Western Kentucky University, George Reynolds has been working at Foxfire in Rabun Gap, Georgia, as music advisor and folklorist. He teaches at Rabun County High School in Tiger, Georgia. This spring I taped George's story. It's about the way he uses storytelling in his classroom to inspire students to talk, write, perform, listen, and learn.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Five years ago, I found myself teaching a seventh grade elective course. I'd been working with music for a couple of years with seventh graders. But that August when I went to school, I discovered I was going to have twenty-five kids for six weeks, then another twenty-five for the next six weeks, and so on. That was a general population of kids, not just the ones interested in music. I had two days to figure out what I was going to do with twenty-five kids for six weeks. Some were interested in music; most were only tangentially interested in music. I was scared to death, so I went to Eliot Wigginton to talk about what to do with these kids. Wig said, "Well, that's a great opportunity to try out some things we've been wanting to do with middle school children."

For years and years at Foxfire, I've taught music performance and also folklore as a social studies, and I've worked with Foxfire classes that are language arts classes. I'm not trained as an English teacher, but as an employee of Foxfire, that's part of the work—books and publishing and writing. I'd also gotten interested in the radio as a vehicle for student writing. Local AM radio stations love to have locally oriented material. Mike Cook, also on the staff here, and I began a radio project about that same time I started my music classes. We did fifteen minute radio programs once a week. The kids would perform, and I'd play some of our Foxfire records. For the elective course, Wig suggested I do two weeks of radio, and maybe a two week collection project (remedies or weather signs or something like that) for the Foxfire magazine, and two weeks *of* storytelling.

The rationale for including storytelling could have come from an idea I had tried a couple of years earlier with one of my folklore classes—an idea from Roadside Theater. Living in Wise County, which is right across from the line from Kentucky, I had known about Appalshop for years. Some of my buddies at Appalshop called up and said, "We have this Roadside Theater group and we're heading to Atlanta. Can we stop and do a job at your school?" They performed for the school, did their Roadside Theater version of *The Jack Tales*—one of the first projects Roadside did. They told stories in small groups. They'd act out the story and narrate the story and speak the dialogue. It was the first time I'd seen that type of storytelling, which is a combination of real stage theatrics and old-fashioned storytelling. It was a great idea, and it worked well. My kids loved it, and I loved the idea of that type of theater—telling stories on stage like that as a group instead of the usual format where a single storyteller gets up. Instead they share the narration. Each person in the group takes on a character and assumes the voice and posture of the character. There are no props, no costumes. The audience makes the imaginative leap. I thought it would be a great idea for my folklore class. I was teaching the folktale as a phenomenon, as an oral tradition, and I wanted my kids to learn some of the elements of the folktale, some of the structural elements, some of the characteristics of what makes the folktale a special type of oral narrative. I had my kids divide into small groups and pick one of *The Jack Tales* and act it it out. Then I had them write their own unique tales—not folktales but stories comprised of the characteristic elements of the folktale. There's a whole list of them. So they performed the tales they'd created for the rest of the class, and I videotaped them. The class judged the tales according to whether or not they met the characteristics of oral narrative. So the kids were using their knowledge of the oral narrative in the construction of it.

When they performed their stories for the rest of the class, they weren't doing it to please me; they were doing it to please an audience of their peers. They were having to synthesize something. The rest of the kids in the class were called upon to evaluate it. I was pleased with the whole exercise because it entailed all of the different levels of Bloom's taxonomy of intellectual activity. The kids didn't think it was work at all.

Let's get back to the seventh grade elective class. They were going to do a magazine or a collection project, some research pieces; they were going to develop radio programs and some music; and the last

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two weeks were for storytelling. We did radio first and storytelling second. The kids loved storytelling so well we never got around to the collection project. The next six weeks, the group started out with radio for a couple of weeks; then we got to storytelling. The same thing happened. The third six weeks, I set the class up another way. The first week, I read stories to them. I played a story that we recorded on one of our Foxfire records, the "Jack and the Giant" story by Stanley Hicks, an old gentleman from North Carolina. I played some videotapes of the Roadside Theater people. I had a film by Georgia Story which was a movie version of a folktale call "Old Dry Fry" with scenery, costumes, all the trappings of film. I had some recordings of other storytellers. I tried to give them a number of different formats in which stories can be conveyed by the media. Plus they read stories. I tried to get all of it. That was the first week. As the week went on and as they got more familiar with what was happening, I asked them to do some organizational writing exercises. Basically, they took notes and then made outlines of the stories as they heard them. I charged them to use no more than fifty words per story. I didn't want them to get busy writing. I just wanted them to learn the concept of how a rubric works, how one word can mean a lot of words. And I wanted them to get accustomed to the idea of organizing language and the plot of the story. I discovered that kids at that age, if you even mention the word outline, react fairly negatively. They were confused about Roman numerals. So I said, "You don't have to use Roman numerals. Just make a simple list of the sequence of events, make bubble charts, draw pictures, do anything you want to do." So the first week was listening and outlining.

The second week, I went through an abstract of the plot of as many folktales as I could lay my hands on and asked the kids to pick out stories they thought they would like to tell. Then I provided books and whatever printed sources I could for them of those stories. "First I want you to read the story, or one of you read the story to the rest of the group, and everybody do an outline. Then we'll work from the outline because I want you to tell the story. Don't worry about memorization. In the folktale there are certain parts of it that are memorized and told verbatim, certain dramatic lines like, 'I'm going to huff. I'm going to puff.' But the rest of the story need not be verbatim."

The kids began to learn about the importance of very dense, dramatic pieces. All storytelling eventually tends to be remembered in terms of formulas, and within these formulas are dense little pieces, almost little super novas of drama and power that decorate. The power of folklore is that it's been distilled through the memory process to where you've got a sure winner by the time it's survived a while. So the second week they were to learn the story and decide who was going to be which character and who was going to narrate and whether or not they were to share the narration. They were to prepare the story so they could tell it in the Roadside Theater manner. The third week, I took them on the road to primary schools around the county to perform for groups of children. Again one of the important components in this activity was they weren't trying to please me but please an audience that they valued.

It was quite a job getting twenty to twenty-five kids in a vehicle, getting them to a school, and then getting them back in a one-hour class period. They were so fired up about doing it they were like a little commando troop. They were ready to go as soon as the bell rang. They had their permission slips. There's a lot to be said here about the socialization process. Sometimes kids were so scared the first time out they would purposefully forget their permission slips. A couple of times, some of the kids stayed out of school that day.

We'd get to the school. I had arranged ahead of time to have three classes waiting for us. I'd have six or seven groups of storytellers in all and start with three groups of volunteers. They'd go in and tell their stories. One of the givens was that the story couldn't take more than ten minutes to tell. They'd have to practice them and hone them down and polish them and zip through them in ten minutes or less. That made the stories better. It fit the attention span of their audiences and it worked. As soon as one group was finished with a story, I'd put another group in until all the groups had told their stories, and sometimes I'd plug groups in to tell their stories a second time. In fact, on some occasions kids got up to tell their stories three times in one meeting. Then I'd load them up and we'd go back to school. On the way back, we'd debrief. The kids talked about how they

did and how the audience reacted.

When a child was absent, the kids in that group had to solve that problem, because they knew the show had to go on. Now stories can be told with one person obviously—traditionally stories are told by a single teller. There are a lot of stories that have a great many characters. In that design the teller often assumes more than one character, changing posture or voice, and the audience goes along with it just fine. By the time we started on the road, the kids knew the story well enough so they could do someone else's part if necessary. They had to think about it on the way to the school and figure out according to what parts they were playing if they'd have an opportunity within the context of the story to fill in and be that missing character. The critical thinking skills the kids had to use in order to do that were pretty remarkable. In fact, one of the more instructive parts about the whole phenomenon was that kids had to deal with problems that they had to solve on the spot. They had to rely on each other, had to trust each other in order to accomplish the group goal. Audiences of young children were very forgiving usually. But my kids perceived them as important as anyone they'd ever been in front of. The kids thought the younger the audience, the less anxiety. They were more comfortable with the younger kids than with sixth graders. Little did they know that the kindergarten and first grade kids imprinted on them like a baby duck on the first thing it sees. They were all eyes. They may not have been the most critical audience, but certainly were the most rapt audience.

On a couple of occasions, I had kids do solo storytelling. The solo storytellers were successful. These were students who had very little success in school and little success socially. By and large they were kids who, for one reason or another, didn't work well with their peers. It was an opportunity for them to be proud of themselves.

My role while the kids were rehearsing and preparing was not so much the "get to work" taskmaster as the person who solved problems and solved dilemmas—such as dealing with the kids who were on the social borderline, who sometimes had difficulty working with other children. For example, if a kid didn't get chosen by a group, I'd go to a group that I perceived as well adjusted and competent and say, "So and so in the corner doesn't have a group. Take care of him, will you?" and they'd say, "Yeh, sure. We'll do it." There were cases of kids who were antisocial to the point that, even though other kids tried to work with them, it just didn't work out. So they'd become solo storytellers. Sometimes, I'd say for two or three per cent of the children in the long haul, this storytelling concept didn't work. Then I'd find other activities, alternatives for them. One of the ground rules is that you never force a kid to do something when you know it's going to be embarrassing. The opposite side of that is it's going to scare most of them to death, and part of the art of teaching is knowing those fine lines between the kid who's scared to death to perform and the kid who's going to be embarrassed. They're all on that edge when they start to storytell. But you push them when they need to be pushed. I had a lot of pushing to do, usually the first time they went out. After that first success, they were six miles taller when they walked back in to the school. It wasn't but a couple of days before they wanted to go to the sixth grade. They were really confident by that time and ready to tell stories for anybody.

We're up to the end of the third week with this seventh grade class so far. At the beginning of the fourth week, we had a class discussion about the folktales with which they were familiar. We used folktales collected from the oral tradition. We read *Jack Tales* and *Grandfather Tales* by Richard Chase and folktales collected by Leonard Roberts up in

Kentucky. I used some folktales in a book called *Outwitting the Devil* which is comprised of the original transcriptions of oral narratives of tellers from Wise County, Virginia, and Eastern Kentucky collected by a man named James Taylor Adams whose stories were subsequently published by Chase as *The Grandfather Tales*.

We used some folktales collected by Georgia State students in a book called *Storytellers: Folktales and Legends from the South*. They also told stories that we'd collected here at Foxfire. So I used traditional stories for this first round. During the fourth week, the kids and I discussed the characteristics that they had recognized in the tales they had told. We brainstormed and wrote all those characteristics that we could remember on the board—as to what folktales seemed to be like from our experience thus far. Some of those characteristics are clearly defined, such as a sense of good characters and bad characters/good behavior and bad behavior. Frequently you'd run into the number "three." Action happens in the sequence of three events, or there'd be three brothers or three sisters, three little pigs. Action happens in a clearly defined set of scenes depending on the setting. You change the setting; you change the scene. It happens in a linear fashion. People who study folklore call that a tableau of scenes. There are certain pieces of dramatic dialogue that are remembered word for word. There is a clear delineation between the narration and actual dialogue of the character. Usually the youngest or the weakest ends up being the hero. There's a whole list.

The plot of the folktale, the ones that we told, fall into two categories. This has also been outlined by scholars. One is what Levi-Strauss calls lack liquidated. I had to interpret that to the kids. The hero starts out with one thing and ends up sitting on top of the world, the poor kid who has no father, and the mother is so poor he has to sell the family cow, and he ends up with the goose that lays the golden egg, or starts out as the girl who sweeps the chimney corner and marries the prince. In the other type of plot, the central character is warned not to do something. Of course, it's promptly done. Then the character has to face the consequences, frequently with a very dramatic escape. Sometimes the escape is so dramatic as to be eaten by the big bad wolf and then rescued by someone who cuts open the wolf or the old troll and out jumps the character.

That admonition/violation/interdiction is a sequence that resonates with the books of prophecy in the Bible. The people were warned and the people sinned and the people were punished. That notion of being warned and failing to heed the warning and suffering the consequences is one of those universal themes of storytelling.

At that point, I charged the kids with the task of writing their own stories based on the internal structure of the folktale, and I asked them to give the story a trickster hero—that is the little weak guy/girl who ends up being the hero. If they wanted to rely on a familiar tale type, that was okay. Some of them used the Billy Goats Gruff, or some used the Cinderella type. Sometimes they borrowed heavily from already existing tale types. They used a lot of modern elements, added pop culture to it. One group's goal was to have their hero capturing the Chewy Chips Ahoy from the bad guy.

Basically they were to make up their tales and use the skeletal elements of folktales on which to hang their own words. That was comfortable for them because they didn't have to create a story by starting with a blank piece of paper. They created their own characters, their dialogue, and their narration. Usually they remained in the same groups they'd started in. I'd let them choose their groups. Sometimes they migrated to different groups and changed things as they worked out and socialized. It was always gender separated at that age.

They performed these stories for audiences, and they readjusted the stories according to reactions of the audience. Frequently, the kids made up stories that didn't have the appropriate balance of conflict and resolution; maybe the timing was a little bit off. I tried to explain Aristotle's notions, at what point the conflict should be over in the story and how the story should climax. I didn't say it had anything to do with Aristotle. But I made a little isosceles triangle and said, "Now develop some problems and then solve them late in the story." Sometimes they paid attention to that; sometimes they didn't. But when they got in front of that audience, they found out quick what the audience would appreciate, so they kept working on them. Then we'd go back and tell

stories. For the next three weeks, we worked through the process of developing a story audiences would appreciate. The work evolved out of experience rather than out of my lecturing, prodding, or admonition. The final activity (or exam as it were) was for each kid to write an individual, polished version of the story. It took us six weeks to get to the written form, but by the time they got there, they'd gone through the process of organizing and really thinking about what they were going to write. That was, in a way, the trophy at the end of the experience. I've often thought about what I would have done if I'd had those kids for another six weeks, where I would have gone from there. I am still intrigued with the notion of where to go from there. I prefer to leave that open for people who hear this story, because I'm interested in what scheme other people would provide.

I need to digress a little bit here. One of the phenomenons that challenged me during the latter part, the creative part, was that a lot of the kids, particularly the boys, tended to want to create stories that were not trickster tales, but hero tales, super hero tales—Rambo or Ramboesque characters who walked in and knocked the bad guys dead. That troubled me for a while because little kids really appreciate the trickster, the little weak guy who becomes the hero. But every class always had a couple of groups that persisted in doing the big guy with the big stick kind of hero. I read in the *Journal of American Folklore* a little later about a study done with German children. When they wrote their own versions of folktales, they tended to write heroic tales rather than trickster tales as well. The interpretation was that there's probably an element of wish fulfillment of children at that age who want to be out killing bears and fighting supervillains. Other studies shed some light on this, too, especially linking language skills and storytelling. Just the other day I looked at a videotape by a teacher who works with early childhood students. They've found that children, especially little boys, learn language skills better if they're given the opportunity to act out narratives. I really haven't done the tightly disciplined quantitative studies that other people have made. I just went from the gut knowing this was a good idea. The kids bore that out.

One way I know it was successful was that at the beginning of each six weeks term, there were usually five or six kids standing in the hall outside of class the first day asking if I'd sign a slip for them to try to go to the guidance counselor and get changed back in to that class for another round. Usually they were the class clowns who had found something that they could do: being the clowns legitimately so to speak.

By the end of the course, the kids were certainly more confident in front of audiences, and many of them who had known little success previously, socially or academically, had something they could count on as a success. On the other hand, some of the kids, the ones who stood out to me, were the boys who had been the "Fonzie" types of characters, who had this tough guy image, who were unable to enter the fantasy realm and be another character. That tough guy image was something that worked for them. I had one in particular I worked with, trying to get him to take the part of the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk." He was afraid even to do that because he was so stuck in his James Dean, young rebel mold. A lot of kids caught in the middle of the pecking order were so conservative it was hard for them to be expressive. It worked best for the kids who were very, very confident or the kids so low on the social pecking order there was nothing to lose. They were the ones who were the stars of the program. The whole point was to find ways for everyone to succeed.

The folktale has a value in the classroom. It's a populist type of narrative. It wouldn't survive if it were poorly constructed or contrived. The things of folklore, both lyric and narratives pieces, employ rhyme and alliteration, the mnemonic devices that help it to survive in people's memory. They're memorable as well in terms of drama, symbolism, imagery. You could add metaphoric content, that complexity of language and image and idea and perhaps even spiritualism which transcends and tends to brand one's brain. William R. Bascom wrote an essay that was in one of my folklore texts in graduate school about the four functions of folklore. As briefly as possible, and they can have one or more of the functions, they can be entertaining, they can be didactic, they reduce or relieve anxiety, they tend to validate culture—things we need to reinforce in order to celebrate our membership in the human race.

Now the folktale is entertaining. It exists as a form of entertainment, but the

folktale, the kind I use in the classroom, is the complex tale or the *märchen*, the German word. Grimm's fairytales are complex tales—more complex, for example, than the animal tales or the formula tales of the jokes or the personal experience narratives or other tales that don't have that formal structure. They are sort of like oral short stories in a way. They are forms of entertainment which aren't told to be true. You start with "Once upon a time," or "I'm fixing to tell about Jack," or some other signal that we're going to go in to this realm of the unreal. It develops what's called psychic distance, and it enables people to say, "Okay, we're going to pretend-like for a while." Within this psychic distance, one is enabled to identify with people who get into pretty scary situations and come out smelling like a rose. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, talks about the importance of folktales enabling children to live through conflicts, fears, experiencing those challenges that make them strong later on. You know how hellishly scary it is for a child to get lost in the mall. Well, Hansel and Gretel's mother lost them on purpose and an old witch gets them and they end up using their own smarts and courage to get out. At the end of the story, they lived happily ever after, a signal the story is over and we're back to the real world.

Although the story's told to be out of the realm of ostensible truth, within the story are great truths. In my experience, the greatest truth and greatest lessons are that greed doesn't pay. Of all the elements of the didactic nature of the folktale, the message that greed is the root of evil or the root of failure is the most compelling message. But there are other things like unkindness or even impoliteness or disregard for justice, disregard for acculturated values. They're didactic in that they teach people courage, even in some cases that audacity is a characteristic well worth paying some attention to. Perseverance is another characteristic—the notion that might is not right and that physical frailty doesn't necessarily mean weakness. According to psychiatrists and psychologists, the fears and anxieties that children face can sometimes be reduced by experiencing success via the story tale. In *The Jack Tales*, the stories validate the kind of behavior that the mountain society expects people to have—

when you're kind to the old man who doesn't have enough to eat for lunch. The hero's the one who sits down to share saying, "I ain't got much but you're welcome to what little I've got." Then Jack opens his bag, and where he thought would be an ash cake and a jar of water are a spice cake and a bottle of wine.

We're talking about a phenomenon here which is basic to the qualities of human civilization. There are elements that may be disturbing to people. There is violence, there's sexism, there's attempted infanticide, with Hansel and Gretel. There is the notion of the occult, witches and potions and spirits and spells—many things that disturb modern thinkers, modern story writers. I'm not sure that every single aspect of the folktale is meant to validate a particular kind of behavior. In a classroom ,the folktale has all these built-in validities because of its survival and because of its hewn qualities. They've been around and they've been useful. They've been didactic.

For teaching language arts in my classroom, I wanted to teach children in a meaningful way about plot and narration, dialogue and characterization, setting and point of view, elements of narrative which are classic elements. That's what the state guidelines say they should learn in the seventh year of school. I pre and post tested those elements and had resounding significant results. They learned in the process of studying tales about conflict and resolution and about detail and about the color and spirit of characters as revealed in the way their dialogue was constructed, about the nature of drama and how action is an important part for the carriage of the story. It gave the students a framework on which to hang some of their burgeoning notions of what narrative is about. I have done this activity in literature classes when I used storytelling with kids and then introduced them to original Southern Appalachian short stories.

One time, Wig and I team taught a class of thirty-five tenth graders. Half of them hated to read; half loved to read. We put them in two groups and used different strategies with each group. I'll never forget. I had the half that hated to read—the class clowns, the disrupters, the terrors for the school. I had one kid in particular whose learning visual modality was weak compared to his auditory and motor skills. He was a star

football player. He could memorize. But he was a very poor reader. He'd never read a book. He was one of those solo storytellers. He did a formula tale called "Cat and Rat." The cat cuts off the rat's tail, and the rat says, "Cat, give my tail back." And the cat says, "Well, you go to cow and get cow to give me milk and I'll give your long tail back." So he goes to cow, and cow says, "You get me corn. I'll give you milk. You give Catty milk. Catty give your long tail back." He goes to the corn crib. Crib says, "You give me a new hinge and I'll give you corn." So he goes to the blacksmith to get a hinge, and the blacksmith wants coal. Every time you go back to square one. He memorized that story. He could tell it quick and snappy. He enjoyed being one of the class clowns. It was legal this time. He was the star, and he was proud of himself. He took that on as one of the things he did well— he was a storyteller. When it came time to read some stories, because stories were something he was good at, he said, "Okay, this is a book of stories. Okay, I'll read it." And he did.❑

Recommended titles from George Reynolds

Greene, Elin and Shannon, George. *Storytelling: A Selected Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland Press, 1986. $25.00.
Over 260 entries cover topics such as the underlying purpose and value of stortytelling, the art and technique, telling to special groups, and more. Videotapes and recordings are included in an appendix.

Chase, Richard, ed. *The Jack Tales*, 1942, and *The Grandfather Tales*, 1948 (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin).
Both texts are southern mountain folk tales. *Jack Tales* centers on the exploits of a trickster hero named Jack, and *Grandfather Tales* features other similar heroes, both female and male. Chase collected at least some of the stories from tellers in western North Carolina and edited them for publication. Because the stories are published in dialect, my kids have some trouble connecting with all the words. But they love the stories just as I did as a kid.

Perdue, Charles L. Jr., ed. *Outwitting the Devil: Jack Tales from Wise County, Virginia*. Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1987 (P.O. box 5401, Santa Fe, NM 87502).
Chase borrowed heavily from field work done in southwestern Virginia by the Virginia Writer's Project. Twenty-eight unaltered versions of field-collected folktales are featured in the text, plus the story of who gathered what from whom. It is interesting to see several variations of the same story told in their original form, then compare them to Chase's version in *Jack Tales* and *Grandfather Tales*.